

IN FOCUS

SYMPTOM PROFILE FOR COVID-19 IN NSW

Reporting period: 1 July to 12 December 2020

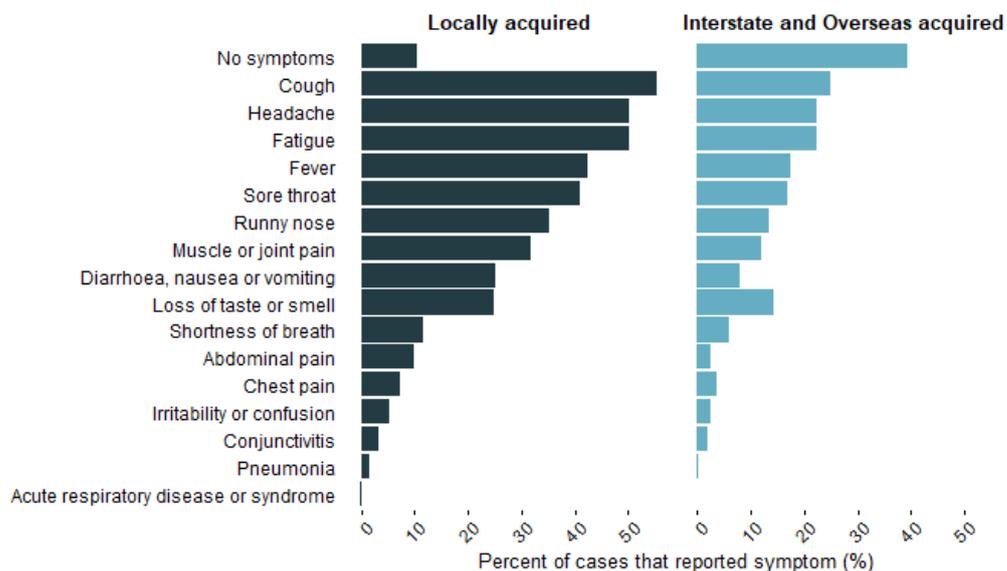
During the initial case interview all newly confirmed COVID-19 cases are asked whether they are currently experiencing any symptoms. This report is an analysis of the symptoms reported and includes all confirmed cases reported in NSW between 1 July and 12 December 2020.

The aim is to demonstrate the frequency of symptoms reported at interview by place of acquisition and age, and how frequently common symptoms have been reported in combination with other symptoms.

Since July 2020, 876 of the 1,256 (70%) confirmed COVID-19 cases have reported at least one symptom. There were 68 records (5%) which had no information on symptoms recorded.

The figure below shows the proportion of each symptom reported at the initial case interview by both locally-acquired cases and cases in returned travellers.

Figure 1. Proportion of COVID-19 cases reporting symptom at initial case interview, by place of acquisition, 1 July to 12 December 2020



Interpretation: Of the 876 cases since July reporting symptoms at interview, 566 were locally acquired, 290 were overseas acquired and 20 were interstate acquired.

Since July, almost 40% of cases in returned travellers reported no symptoms at the initial interview. This may reflect the screening programs performed during mandatory quarantine, and that people are returning positive testing results for old infections that are no longer symptomatic.

The majority of symptoms reported by **locally-acquired** COVID-19 cases in New South Wales are consistent with a mild respiratory infection. The principal symptoms reported in cases were cough (55%), headache (50%), fatigue (50%) and fever (42%).

More severe respiratory syndromes at diagnosis, including pneumonia, shortness of breath and/or acute respiratory distress (ARD), were reported in 15% (94/633) of locally-acquired cases. Of the four cases who died in this period none recorded severe symptoms at diagnosis.

Difference in symptom profile by age group

Differences in reported symptoms may be influenced by a range of variables including the age of the case and the surveillance strategies used. Many children may have their parent or guardian conduct the interview on their behalf and may not be able to articulate the range of symptoms they are currently experiencing.

The table below shows the proportion of symptoms reported by each age group for locally-acquired cases.

Table 1. Proportion of locally-acquired COVID-19 cases reporting symptom at initial case interview by age group, 1 July to 12 December 2020

| Symptoms | Age group at event | | | | | | | | |
|-----------------------------------|--------------------|-----------|-----------|------------|------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| | 0-4 | 5-11 | 12-17 | 18-29 | 30-49 | 50-59 | 60-69 | 70-79 | 80+ |
| No symptoms reported at interview | 29% | 13% | 12% | 10% | 10% | 8% | 6% | 13% | 17% |
| Cough | 43% | 37% | 47% | 61% | 53% | 65% | 53% | 74% | 58% |
| Headache | 5% | 37% | 43% | 60% | 55% | 53% | 53% | 45% | 17% |
| Fatigue | 24% | 13% | 43% | 56% | 56% | 49% | 59% | 45% | 58% |
| Fever | 48% | 17% | 28% | 43% | 42% | 51% | 53% | 52% | 42% |
| Sore throat | 29% | 33% | 47% | 52% | 43% | 35% | 33% | 35% | 17% |
| Runny nose | 38% | 47% | 40% | 38% | 39% | 31% | 27% | 16% | 17% |
| Muscle and/or joint pain | 0% | 10% | 17% | 30% | 38% | 40% | 46% | 29% | 17% |
| Diarrhoea, nausea or vomiting | 14% | 17% | 17% | 32% | 24% | 27% | 26% | 32% | 25% |
| Loss of taste and/or smell | 0% | 10% | 23% | 26% | 28% | 29% | 31% | 13% | 8% |
| Shortness of breath | 5% | 3% | 7% | 14% | 13% | 15% | 17% | 3% | 0% |
| Abdominal pain | 0% | 13% | 9% | 9% | 10% | 9% | 13% | 6% | 17% |
| Chest pain | 0% | 0% | 5% | 7% | 9% | 7% | 10% | 10% | 17% |
| Irritability or confusion | 14% | 3% | 4% | 4% | 8% | 1% | 4% | 6% | 17% |
| Conjunctivitis | 5% | 0% | 4% | 4% | 3% | 3% | 4% | 3% | 0% |
| Pneumonia | 0% | 0% | 0% | 1% | 0% | 3% | 7% | 0% | 8% |
| Acute respiratory distress | 0% | 0% | 0% | 0% | 0% | 0% | 1% | 0% | 0% |
| Cases | 21 | 30 | 75 | 114 | 184 | 96 | 70 | 31 | 12 |

Interpretation: The symptom profile among adults was consistent across ages 18–69 year olds. The more severe respiratory symptoms, such as pneumonia and acute respiratory distress, were more prevalent in older people.

The main symptoms reported at diagnosis for each age group are:

- Young children (0-4 years) – fever (48%), cough (43%), runny nose (38%), and sore throat (29%).
- Primary school-aged children (5-11) – runny nose (47%), cough (37%), headache (37%), sore throat (33%) and fever (17%).
- High school-aged children (12-17) – cough (47%), sore throat (47%), headache (43%), fatigue (43%) and runny nose (40%).
- Older adults (80+) – cough (58%), fatigue (58%), fever (42%), and diarrhoea and/or nausea and vomiting (25%).

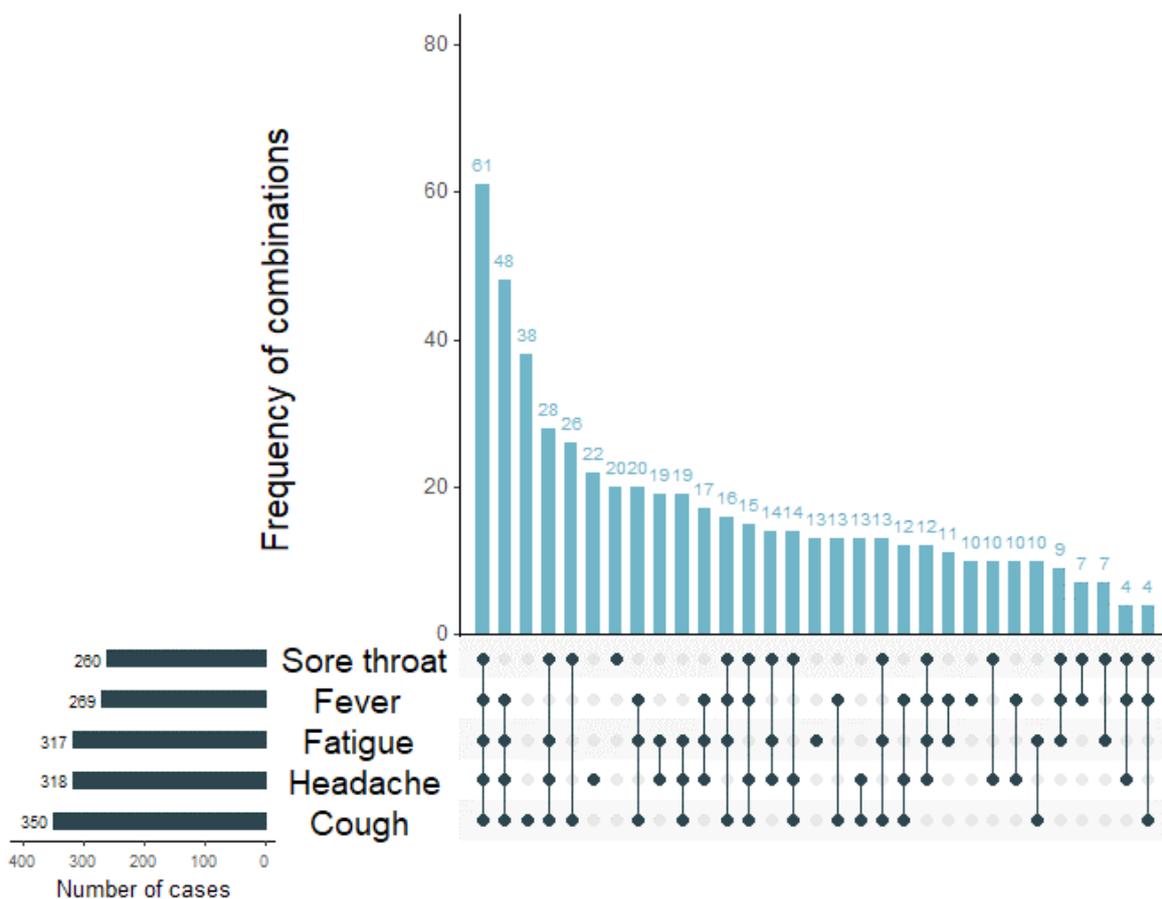
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Multiple symptoms

A typical symptom profile of a COVID-19 case includes the reporting of multiple symptoms.

Figure 2 shows the variation in combinations of symptoms observed in locally-acquired cases for the five most frequently observed symptoms (sore throat, fever, fatigue, headache, and cough). The horizontal bars on the left show the number of cases reporting that symptom, either individually or in combination. The black circles and lines indicate particular combinations of the five symptoms, with the vertical green bars showing how many cases reported that combination.

Figure 2. Combinations of COVID-19 symptoms in locally-acquired cases, 1 July to 12 December 2020



Interpretation: 61 locally-acquired cases recorded the top five symptoms more often than any other combination of symptoms. Cough is the most common symptom to be reported without any other symptom (38 cases), followed by headache (22 cases) and sore throat (22 cases). Fatigue, headache and fever are more likely to be reported in combination with another symptom rather than individually.